

Friend

By

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Tater. His real name was Willam Francis McKinny III, but he got the name Tater because he was about as useless as a potato on legs when he drank. His best friend, Nick Plakowitz, named him that soon after the two of them started stealing jim Beam from Nick's Dad's liquor locker in the basement that was set up like a pool hall. Nick poured wáter in the square booze bottle, so his Dad wouldn't know.

Tater said, "He's gonna know."

"Nah, he don't want to deal with it. He too busy with that paint business of his."

Tater shrugged. Nick's Dad never said a word.

They took the bourbon, disguised in a soda bottle, out to the graveyard next to the old Dutch Reform church. They hid behind the large, cool Van Laningham stone, mixed the whiskey with grape Nehi and chased it with Cheetos

Tater did not like the taste of the liquor, but he got used to it, fast. The soda masked the scorch, and soon Tater was running among the gravestones, his arms flung out to take in

the green grass and summer day, lifting him to another level that his brain had never seen.

He learned to chase that buzz forever. The first shot was good, like the first puff of the cigarette. They had cigarettes from Tater's mom, who liked to start the day with a fresh pack. She threw the half empties in a drawer in the bathroom. Tater was sure she knew, but the boys were fast, and gone. They had bikes. It was summer.

The thing that brought them together also drew them apart. Tater had a new friend: Jim Beam. Nick couldn't take it the way Tater did. He had many a session in the vomitorium after the two of them met Jim, so Tater went his own way, and, oh, what a way he went.

He had black hair and a red beard, and he played the guitar and sang like Robert Johnson. He didn't look anything like a potato any more. He was tall and lanky. He played gigs in bars around Chicago, mostly the blues, because that's what Tater knew best. Mary had left him. He'd hardly ever see that daughter of his, now that they were back in Georgia. She said she didn't know him, never knew him, really, because of that skewed look in his eyes from all the booze and the smell of him, like something processed, rotten and sweet. He drawled when he shouldn't. He couldn't hold a gig down because he drank beyond the house allowance, and his fingers weren't so nimble at the picking any more. He was only 34.

His best friend, and now his only friend, remained Jim Beam.

The bar was dark. It smelled funky like his mouth, like the one-room studio he rented in Bucktown, like the beer he left on the floor all night, the one he didn't finish at 4 o'clock in the morning. The whiskey was long gone.

He was the only one in the place, except for the bartender who was dipping glasses in soapy water and stacking them aimlessly, unrinsed. The pinball machine cast blue and yellow light on the floor, on the bartender's face. Tater's head felt like it was split in two places, really, he felt like banging it on the bar top to split it for good and end it all. There wasn't a day he had a clear head, when he didn't feel shakey like the ground was shifting beneath him.

"Gimme a shot," he said, in a trance, his eyes roving from soapy bubbles to pinging, softly flashing blue and yellow.

The bartender looked up. "Morning." But he didn't move from the sink.

"I said, a shot."

"A shot of what."

"Oh, fuck, shoot me." Tater put his head down on the bar and wept.

The bartender dropped the dirty rag he was using on the glasses. He said, "You know, one morning I woke up on this floor behind the counter. I had stripes on my face from the wooden slats. I decided to try coffee instead of my usual picker-upper."

Tater lifted his head and looked from the blinking yellow and blue light of the pinball machine to the door where the blue sky and bright sun sent a glow over the summer day, a day so much like that in the graveyard.

“I’ll have what you’re having.”

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